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Building capacity in struggling schools

Jane Cullen

Introduction

In September 2001, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) began a three year school improvement pilot project with a small number of secondary schools which face ‘extremely challenging circumstances’. There are eight secondary schools involved and they range in size from just over 400 students to almost 1200. Two of them are denominational schools and one is a boys’ only school. The schools are all located in areas which suffer from severe socio-economic deprivation. Several of the schools have high student mobility, in some cases with a turnover of up to a third of the students each year. Several of them have a high proportion of their students who speak English as an additional language. Each school was included in the pilot on the basis of the following criteria: 15% or fewer of the students achieving 5 A* to C in 1999 and 2000; 40% or more of the students eligible for free school meals (FSM), 39% or more assessed as having special education needs (SEN), and the school having been assessed as having good or better management in their most recent Ofsted inspection (statutory school inspection carried out by the Office for Standards in Education). Among these eight schools in fact, attainment at the end of KS4, (i.e. at the age of 16) in terms of the percentage of students gaining 5A*-Cs at GCSE/GNVQ, (the government benchmark of performance in these national examinations) has varied year to year from 1% to 21%. However for most of the schools for most years 1994-2001, it has not risen above 15%. While the DfES criteria for inclusion in the project were finalised in terms of attainment figures, FSM, and SEN, other criteria were considered, including a minimum number of ethnic minorities, and high pupil turnover. The eight schools also provide a geographical spread.

The pilot project includes provision for flexibility in the application of the National Curriculum, a reading programme to support non-fluent readers in Year 7 and Year 8, (i.e. for 11 and 12 year old students) the strategic use of data for target-setting and student tracking, innovative uses of information and communication technology (ICT)

to support learning for students and networking for teachers, training programmes for teachers and middle managers, the establishment of a school improvement group (SIG) in each school, support for the headteachers, and overall support for building capacity in the schools

The goal of the project is to “raise standards”. Its aim is to “develop and test new and innovative approaches and to research existing practice” in order to raise attainment, particularly at KS4. The DfES describe the project as ‘research-based’ and uses the term ‘action research’. Findings are expected to be not only of advantage to the schools themselves in facing the challenge of low attainment, but also more generally to all schools in challenging circumstances.

Each school has agreed, as part of the conditions of the funding and support being given, to facilitate the gathering of evidence within their schools. This includes regular visits from Her Majesty’s Inspectors (HMI), an annual attitude survey of staff, students and parents, and access given to an external evaluator from the University of Cambridge research team. Data gathering for the evaluation includes regular visits each term to the schools to assess the impact of the initiatives. In addition, data gathering is being carried out within the wider community of each school, from the programme training providers and from the DfES itself. The University of Cambridge began its evaluation in April 2002 and is committed to providing the DfES with evaluation through to the end of the project, which finishes in the schools in July 2004.

Scope of the DfES pilot project

The scope of the pilot project includes:

- Additional funding and resources for each school
- Initiatives to raise student attainment
- Overall support to build capacity

Additional resources for the school

There has been direct funding by the DfES to the eight schools. In the first financial phase of the project, from September 2001 to March 2002, all the eight schools received £150,000. For the financial year April 2002 to March 2003, each school has received at least £150,000 with the possibility of up to £50,000 worth of extra funding for negotiated spending linked to a Raising Attainment Plan (RAP). Funding for the financial year 2003-2004 will again be a core amount of £150,000 with up to £50,000 additionally available.

In all of the schools, a significant amount of this funding is being spent on staff. In some cases, additional staff have been employed (for example, an assistant headteacher with specific project responsibilities). In some cases, there has been more general spending on staff, including spending on supply cover to ensure teacher planning time and spending on extra staff to free subject leaders for the development of staff within departments. There has also been spending on salary enhancements for staff with project responsibilities.

There has also been direct funding from the DfES of some of the new ICT hardware needed for the proposed innovations in the use of ICT in the schools. This was effected on a needs basis. For example, an ICT audit undertaken by an external auditor showed a marked disparity in the provision of ICT hardware and software among the eight schools. It was a project decision to provide the finance to ensure that each of the eight schools has at least two interactive whiteboards. Their introduction enables each school to take advantage of innovative curriculum resources possible with such hardware.

Initiatives aimed directly at raising attainment

There are several project programmes aimed directly at raising attainment. One involves the greater, more strategic and streamlined use of data in the schools. A data management system, where data is entered only once by the school, has been developed for use in each of the schools. It is to serve several purposes. Firstly, it is to

provide each school with output which can answer the needs of senior managers, heads of departments or classroom teachers. Secondly, it is to use the data to provide more accurate and better developed target setting for students. The data, once entered onto a master file in the school, can be used for individual target-setting for students, the tracking of individual students through KS3 and KS4 (i.e. age 11 to age 16) and the monitoring of groups of students in particular subjects. The eight schools have agreed to provide termly assessments (based on refinements of National Curriculum levels) in all subjects for each of their students.

There is flexibility built in to the project to disapply the National Curriculum in order to concentrate on agreed priorities for groups of students. For example, the decision to introduce an intensive reading programme in Year 7 in the schools came out of an early meeting of the headteachers, concerned that the KS3 literacy strategy cannot provide enough of an impact to raise the extremely low levels of literacy of some of the incoming students. The concern is that, as a result, students are unable to access the KS3 curriculum. The aim of the reading programme, being piloted this year, is to increase reading fluency in a core group of underachieving students. This programme is one which concentrates on the phoneme/grapheme nature of the language and uses strictly limited text and intensive practice, pair and small group work in class. It is designed to last a school year with four one hour lessons a week, necessitating taking time from National Curriculum subjects to effect it. Each school has committed up to 100 students to the programme.

Another initiative is to promote the use of interactive whiteboards in classrooms. Each of the project schools has at least two such whiteboards (some already have more: for example one of the schools has thirteen). Training sessions have already taken place (for example one full-day Saturday session held at one of the schools in November 2002) and further training is planned. The training includes specific teaching strategies sessions for teachers of core subjects (English, Maths and Science) as well as the use of successful ICT commercial packages.

Support to build capacity in the schools

There are a number of initiatives aimed at raising capacity in the schools. One goal is to achieve a greater spread of leadership in the schools. There are strategies for developing the capacity of the staff, for example through the greater use of middle managers. Important also is the development of a School Improvement Group (SIG). A further initiative is to develop collaboration among the eight schools.

The training of a first cohort of middle managers occurred during the school year 2001-2002. Up to three middle managers from each of the eight schools were trained by means of a six day programme run by an external training provider on a DfES approved programme (a programme targeted at all schools facing challenging circumstances). Included in the training of the first cohort was an 11 week in-school project to undertake mentoring a fellow middle manager on the basis of the training that they had received. There is a second cohort of middle managers undergoing training this year, though the mentoring aspect of the training is apparently being dropped.

Core to building capacity is the establishment of a SIG in each of the schools. Training providers have been commissioned to support and co-ordinate the implementation of school improvement groups in each of the schools. The group is working on co-ordinated improvement work for the school as a whole. The make-up of the group is cross-hierarchical and membership of each cadre is intended to ensure that each member has a clear link to an initiative or has a means to influence development in the school. The purpose of the group is to be the catalyst for innovation and improvement ideas in the school. Training began for the SIG group members in September 2002 and continues through the two years of the project.

There are also strategies to foster collaboration among the eight project schools and to allow them to draw more easily on external support. Plans are now well underway for regular video links between the schools. Each school is now equipped to engage in video-conferencing and time has been coordinated to allow staff to network in these ways. The use of interactive whiteboards is also linked to the introduction of this video conferencing equipment, to enable staff across the eight schools to demonstrate

and share resources that are used in electronic form. There are also plans for a dedicated website to be set up within the national DFES website. The website is to be a closed one, accessed by password, and will be, at least in the pilot stage, specifically for the eight schools. It is planned that staff at the schools will use it to share curriculum resources and strategies. There is suggestion of a higher level of closed access, to allow the headteachers to share information such as financial planning.

Burdens

For these eight struggling schools, the taking on of a school improvement project provides additional burdens. For schools in extremely challenging circumstances, it is not easy to incorporate 'disturbance' to their routines. The interventions of the DfES of themselves make heavy demands on staff time and commitment. As a condition of participation, the schools are all subject to twice yearly visits from HMI; this is in addition to the usual statutory Ofsted inspections. They have to cope with regular, frequent visits from external agencies, for example some of the training providers involved to the project. Training of staff also regularly takes place off-site and over several days: this means that the schools are often losing numbers of their best and most committed staff for significant periods of time. Perhaps for this reason, there have been varying degrees of participation in the training programmes among the schools.

The story so far

Though the project officially began in September 2001, the first year, 2001-2002 is seen by most of the participants as a time in which the pilot project was being set up. Activities during this year centred on researching the existing state of affairs in the school and planning for change. The headteachers met (and continue to meet) on a regular basis with the DfES project adviser but other members of the schools were much less involved. The DfES commissioned an ICT audit and an initial attitude survey of staff, students and parents (which is to be repeated during the next two years

of the project). The reading programme teachers were trained during the summer term of 2002. The schools planned for the introduction of their SIG groups, though training did not begin until September 2002. There was training of a first cohort of middle managers during this year. However from the point of view of most people involved, it was in September 2002 that the project began the phase of full implementation.

From first interviews with headteachers at seven of the eight schools, during the summer term of 2001-2002, the general perception among the heads was that they are positive about the project and about the difference that it can make in their schools. There has been general welcome of the extra funding and of the improvement, for example in staffing, that has been possible because of it. There has, in general, been positive reaction to the training and interviews with the heads included many stories of enthusiasm and positive feedback from participants. There were, however, negative feelings from some headteachers and staff because of concerns about ownership of the project. Several headteachers commented how, in the early planning stages, the emphasis was on the heads' expertise and ability to drive the project but that this emphasis has shifted and there were now increasing demands for evaluation and accountability, including the inspections by HMI and the evaluation by the University of Cambridge.

From a first interview with the DfES project adviser, during the summer term of 2001-2002, her perception was that the heads were only then beginning to bring the improvement agenda to the fore. In the early planning stages not all heads appeared to be persuaded that substantial improvement was a realistic goal. The heads were still tending to view the project as peripheral to their endeavours but the project was moving slowly towards the centre ground. In summer 2002, her view was that the heads were likely to view the project as a series of programmes rather than a coherent action research project and that the group seemed dependent on the project adviser to make plain the learning. However, the heads were gaining in confidence and vision. From her point of view, the schools themselves are clearly moving towards a more strategic problem-solving mode. Lessons about how to build capacity are being learnt at school level and a wide range of staff are developing understanding and the skills necessary to sustain school improvement (for example on how to use performance data for target setting and tracking).

In general, from data gathered during further school visits, during the autumn term of 2002-2003, (when implementation began) there has been an enthusiastic response so far from the staff involved in the initiatives. The reaction to the SIG group training so far this year and to the middle management training of last year has been particularly favourable. There has been more of a mixed reaction to the reading programme, with some participants (both staff and students) highly favourable in terms of their perception of the impact it is having on learning, and some expressing reservations, for example that the highly structured nature of the lessons is restricting.

There have also been caveats. For example, there have been suggestions from the participants that relatively little is known about the training before it actually begins and that training was undifferentiated, in that it did not seem to take account of individuals' previous experience or needs. Some schools have not committed themselves as much as others to particular initiatives (for example by sending fewer numbers on training, or by not sending them to all the sessions). The objectives of the training have also not always been clearly defined. For example, with the middle management training, while middle managers with different complementary strengths being trained together seems a powerful model, it is not clear specifically how the training last year is to be implemented in the schools this year. Staff turnover has had some restraining effects on the impact of the work.

The DfES as a direct provider

The DfES has taken on the role of a delivery organisation with this project. This requires a set of attitudes towards schools as clients, and practices that go with this. There is the need to consider the demands that this makes on the DfES and the long term implications. It is a question to be answered as to whether the DfES can sustain this kind of role. The term 'action research' is used by the DFES to describe this project though it is unclear whether the project began in a way which would be consistent with action research and it needs to be considered whether the project is now becoming the action research project it was intended to be. It is possible the

‘action research-ness’, the kind of participatory enquiry with practitioners reflecting on questions and producing change within their own organisation, involves self reflection and development at the DfES as well as at the eight schools

Building capacity

Many features of this project, besides those already mentioned, are consistent with suggestions in the literature and research-based evidence for capacity building. According to Harris (2001) and Hopkins and Reynolds (2001), capacity building involves creating conditions in which staff development involves mutual learning and collaborative planning and one where there is effective coordination of strategies (Hopkins and Reynolds 2001). Hargreaves’s explanation of *leverage* (Hargreaves 2001) informs a view that the initiatives have the best chance of working if they result from a relatively low input of energy for a large impact on effectiveness. A notion of *coherence* takes this idea a little further. The more the initiatives fit with each other together, the less energy needed to implement them, and if each of them is a high leverage strategy, their combination and the sequence of their implementation over time will lead to maximum impact for minimum input of energy.

An important question from the outset has concerned the *coherence* of the approach from the DfES and a sense of an overall plan and a vision which drives this package of initiatives. Even more important than coordination in terms of how the DfES has put the package together is coherence from the point of view of each of the eight schools. For the package of initiatives to be high leverage, it needs to fit in with the overall development programme in each of the schools in terms of both the sequence and priority of initiatives. From interviews with the headteachers, it is apparent that this DfES project, though important and highly valued, takes its place among other initiatives with which individual schools are involved. Funding the school is a major issue for each of these schools and it would be shortsighted to assume that they can afford to forgo other sources of funding and development for the three years that they are involved in this project. One of the eight headteachers has said that she would ‘knit fog’ to obtain funding; another ‘spent’ £3 million in as many minutes on explaining how she would like to refurbish the school. Inevitably, in each of the eight

schools, there is a distinct view of the project and a distinct meshing of the project with their other initiatives.

Sergiovanni (2001) suggests that capacity is rooted in flexibility and an understanding of the organic and dynamic nature of change. For change to become 'change capacity', Hannay et al. (2001) suggest that schools need to develop the means to support change, and that collaboration and teamwork, a democratic process of decision-making and the local and context-driven nature of solutions are all necessary, as individuals need to accept the responsibility of involvement. According to Sergiovanni (2001), solutions are not necessarily easily generalisable. True capacity building is the creation of "local capacity" where there exist "local communities of responsibility". Local solutions (or rather solutions which fit local conditions) and perceptions of *ownership* of the project are important. Mention has already been made of some tensions between the schools and the DfES about whose project this is, and it seems important that the schools affirm ownership. As important is that ownership is renewed dynamically throughout the length of the project. Each school will be a different school at the end of the project, in part at least because of pragmatic considerations such as staff mobility and student turnover.

The length of this project raises questions about whether a project funded for two or three years is sufficient to bring about long-term improvement. For Hargreaves (2001), *intellectual capital* is the sum of all the knowledge and experience of the school community and intellectual capital grows by knowledge creation and transfer. An improving school increases intellectual capital by using high leverage strategies. It is an important question as to what is a reasonable time scale for an effective knowledge-creation and transfer process. For Gray et al, (1999), change must not be short-term but rather fundamental and fundamentally changing. Hannay et. al (2001) suggest that fundamental change occurs chaotically and unpredictably and is a long term phenomenon and evidence from long-term projects such as the Chicago schools project (Bryk et. al. 1998), suggests that reforms take several years to bring about noticeable and sustained improvement in performance.

Implications for leadership

Evidence so far from this DfES pilot project suggests that instability, (in terms at least of personnel), may be a fact of life in struggling schools. During the first year of the project, three of the eight headteachers of the pilot schools have left (one has taken early retirement and two have left on grounds of ill-health) and there have been additional changes among senior management teams. Recruitment and retention of staff has been an issue at more than one of the schools for several years, and several of them, as already mentioned, also suffer from a high turnover of students. These eight schools are engaged in a project which involves inevitable instability (in terms at least of a reshaping of teaching and learning) during a period of change and development. A period of sustained risk-taking cannot be easy for such schools, even with the backing of the DfES. (Though the fact of the pilot project is being taken into consideration, the schools are subject to the usual statutory Ofsted inspections). Perhaps it is unrealistic to expect long-term stability from schools in extremely challenging circumstances. However, it is as yet unclear how much instability has been factored into this pilot project nor yet how much the success of this project depends on a certain degree or a certain kind of stability in the schools.

The fact that several of the schools in the pilot project are presently experiencing dramatic changes among their senior management team is perhaps in itself indicative that other kinds of leadership in such schools would help to sustain long term improvement. It seems a common sense notion to have leadership spread as widely as possible. Jackson (2000) affirms the importance of headteachers supporting this spread of leadership and Harris (2002) suggests that effective leadership strategies from heads in schools facing challenging circumstances include developing and involving other members of staff as widely as possible. The middle management training and the establishment of the SIG group are clearly spreading leadership among a greater proportion of the staff. The SIG group seems a particularly important development. For Frost and Durrant,

... there is a need to embrace new forms of leadership, in particular 'teacher leadership'

(Frost and Durrant , 2002a:1).

They argue that it is critical that such leadership is fully supported by the headteachers. However, for, it is important that leadership is not just a matter of distribution or dispersion (with its suggestion of the prerogative of leadership remaining within the boundaries of the traditional school hierarchy), but of teachers' *agency*: that is their choices in initiating and sustaining change (Frost and Durrant 2002b). It is teacher leadership of development work with an explicit focus on teaching and learning which is important (Frost and Durrant 2002a),

There is obvious potential in the SIG group which has been set up in each of the schools to be a catalyst for this capacity building. However, for that to happen it is important that the SIG group is given the space and time for leadership. This does not mean simply the joint timetabling of non-teaching periods so that they can meet, though matters like this are extremely important and there are some tensions over time allocation in certain of the eight schools. It means rather that conditions are created in school for the SIG group to exercise their leadership. It means also that the SIG group needs to be knowledgeable and well-informed so that it makes decisions in terms of a thorough understanding of the overall development programme of the school. It means also, for example, that the SIG's ability to make appropriate development decisions is accepted and respected. A SIG group with a clearly articulated authority for action could be powerful in building capacity.

This project represents a major commitment by the DfES and these eight schools. It is already possible to see some very positive effects and there is the potential to learn much that would be useful to similar schools. The eight schools are in extremely challenging circumstances, and these circumstances themselves present challenges to school improvement initiatives. It remains to be seen how the schools, the DfES, the project providers, HMI and the evaluators can work to develop the capacity-building in these schools which will help to improve attainment and the life chances of their students.

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